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A STUDY OF SIR GAWAIN AS A
SERIOUS-IRONIC HERO IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled A STUDY OF SIR GAWAIN AS A SERIOUS-IRONIC HERO IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT, submitted by Margaret Anne Luyat in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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PREFACE

This study attempts to demonstrate that a new image of the knightly hero emerges in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight by virtue of the author's simultaneous presentation of the chivalric perfections of the knight along with the human imperfections of the man. The author's paradoxical view of Gawain permeates the entire narrative and is worked out in minute detail. That is why, in dealing with the hero, it is necessary to analyze closely those symbols and characters with which the author surrounds him.

The author's view of life, as he expresses it in the poem, is one based on his appreciation of the complexity of life. For him, no event is an unmixed blessing. Both suffering and good, for example, come out of the visit of the Green Knight to Arthur's court. For this reason, it must be said that the author is not attracted to the standard image of the hero found in most romances, that of the irreproachable knight who will never taste the bitterness of making difficult, borderline decisions, that of the man who is never forced to struggle.

It will be seen that in the typical chivalric literature of the Middle Ages, knighthood takes on the character of a mask, which disguises the personality of the hero as effectively as the armor he wears hides his physical appearance. Those romances

which drop the mask to reveal the man frequently undermine the character of the knight by placing him in highly questionable situations. Without debasing Gawain's character in any way, the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight manages to preserve the knightly mask and at the same time to permit a glimpse behind it. As the title of this discussion suggests, he uses the technique of irony to illustrate the hero's unique, human character. Although the presence of irony in the story indicates criticism of the hero on the part of the author, it is definitely not of a destructive nature; on the contrary, it is of an amiable, sympathetic, and constructive kind. And it works like sudden, unexpected flashes of light which emphasize, not for the first time, but in a new way, the human qualities of the hero and his quest.

This study will consider the possibility that the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight uses the romance conventions to create his own concept of a romance hero, and that he chooses to unite the serious and ironic elements of his narrative in the person of the hero, Sir Gawain.

CHAPTER I

THE HERO OF ROMANCE

As a necessary preface to any discussion of the extraordinary Sir Gawain of this poem, attention should be given to the more typical chivalric hero as well as to other medieval romances in which Gawain is the hero. Although the hero figure of medieval literature has never been defined beyond dispute, he is, usually, either a superman of action who undertakes unbelievable quests, or as a moral superman whose character is without blemish of any kind.

The Conventional Chivalric Hero

In many respects, the chivalric superman of action can be profitably compared to the protagonist of the contemporary espionage novel. The great majority of romances, even though they were written for a literate aristocracy, belonged to a form of popular culture and were directed toward a mass audience just as the modern thriller is. Both genres, although separated by centuries, depend on breathless action and a well known set of conventions. If the splendid horse and magic sword of the wandering knight have been replaced for the spy of the twentieth century with their equivalents, a fast car, hidden microphones, and secret weapons, the athletic virtues required of the hero are very much the same. It was expected of the romance hero, as it is expected of

In most instances, the chivalric superman of action, like the young King Arthur, is a youthful and courageous figure who is ready to do battle at a moment's notice. The picture presented of this type of knight in most of the romances is that of the knight totally dedicated to one aspect of his office, the warlike one.

But the romance dealing with a moral superman of chivalry could often be included in a book of saints' lives. The heroes of such romances are totally dedicated to the other aspect of knighthood, the religious one. Two examples of this type of hero are Galahad and Perceval whose spotless moral characters enable them to achieve the quest of the Holy Grail.¹ The ironclad convention of knighthood, in the most Christian sense of the word, envelops them and all other heroes of this type. They are never subjected to analysis or criticism. Like the superman of action, the moral superman is set up to be admired, even though the basis for admiration is totally different in the two cases. The conventional chivalric knight of fiction, whether he has superhuman physical or moral qualities, is most often hidden by the trappings of his office. Because he never drops the mask of the knight, the man is never seen and neither is his human struggle or the decisions he must make to achieve human greatness.

Gawain in the Middle Ages

The person of Sir Gawain, as he is developed in the fiction of the Middle Ages, is a good example of what has been said about

knightly heroes in general.² Whether he is painted as a warrior or a saint, Gawain is never allowed to drop the mask of the knight. In romance lore, Gawain typifies the great warrior, the courteous knight, and the most extraordinary lover of ladies known to his age. These three fields of endeavor presented enough material for more than four centuries of stories about Gawain. Each romancer develops the material in his own way, of course. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze briefly the personage of Gawain as he appears in several representative romances.

Le Chevalier a l'Epee, a French poem dating from the end of the twelfth century, has been suggested by Kittredge³ and others as a possible analogue for part of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. It is doubly interesting because all three facets of Gawain's personality: warrior, lover, and knight, are represented in one romance.

The imperious host of a castle where Gawain takes refuge subjects Gawain to a series of obedience tests in which the penalty for failure is his life. When Gawain, who is forewarned, does all that he is told without hesitation, the host insists that Gawain go to bed with his daughter. In bed, Gawain is separated from the host's daughter by a sword which has killed hundreds of other knights placed in the same tempting position. However, when Gawain tries to reach the daughter, the sword instead of killing him, merely wounds him. In the morning, the

host is disappointed to find Gawain is still alive and wants to know why the sword has not killed him. When the host learns who Gawain is, he decides the sword has chosen the best knight in the world for his daughter. That night, after a great feast, no sword prevents Gawain from reaching the daughter. He does not hesitate to take advantage of the situation.

In this poem, Gawain fills a role that he fills in many other French romances where women fall at his feet.⁴ He accepts all the adventures that come his way without considering the moral obligations that might be present. In fact, the moral overtones are carefully sifted out of the story. As one commentator on Le Chevalier a l'Epee says of Gawain's relationship with the daughter:

. . . Gawain can have no enduring liaison. He must take the daughter for he has won her, and the winning of her is part of the tale; but the conteur wants to get rid of the lady, and he accordingly substitutes for the proper conclusion . . . a well known cynical parable that contrasts the fidelity of dogs with the faithlessness of women.⁵

Seemingly unable to create a woman as worthy of Gawain as Guinevere was of Lancelot, the romancers allow him to be the idol and winner of all, often without regard for the motivating factors, the moral consequences, or the unity of characterization.

This romance is particular in that the "cynical parable" of which Kittredge speaks is introduced. While Gawain is taking the daughter of his imperious host back to Camelot, he is accosted by a strange knight who demands her release. The stranger also proposes that they avoid a battle by permitting the girl to

choose between them. The girl chooses the stranger. Her choice inspires Gawain's angry if measured statement that he will not go back on his bargain for someone who does not care for him:

"Ja Dieus," fet Gauvains, "ne me voie
Quant je contredit i metrai
Ne quant je ja m'en combatrai
De chose qui de moi n'a cure."⁶

It is only when the stranger attempts to take the dogs as well, and the dogs choose Gawain, that Gawain kills the knight. This event instigates his bitter remarks comparing the faithfulness of dogs and women:

"Une chose sachiez de chien:
Ja son mestre qui norri l'a
Por estrange ne changera.
Feme a mout tost guerpi lo suen
Si ne li conplist tot son buen;
Si est merveille de tel change
Qui lou suen laisse por estrange.
Li levrier ne m'ont pas guerpi,
Dont puis je bien prover issi _____
Je n'en sere desdiz de rien _____
Que nature et amor de chien
Valt miauz que de feme ne fait."⁷

This cynical treatment of the relationship between men and women is cited to show what the irony of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight avoids so successfully. For one thing, the obvious bitterness in Le Chevalier a l'Epee destroys character, while the more subtle irony in Sir Gawain reveals the intricacy of the human personality. In the French poem, the serious and ironic tones are not harmoniously blended, with the result that the irony becomes caustic: in its light, both Gawain and the daughter appear ridiculous and unattractive. To put it another way, the irony in Sir

Gawain and the Green Knight is used to inject humor into tense battles of wits, while the irony in Le Chevalier a l'Epee merely injects venom into a slack and mediocre exchange. Even though irony of a certain kind is introduced into the French poem, it adds nothing new to the characterization of the hero, who remains a typical chivalric superman.

Le Livre d'Artus, an old French prose romance whose exact date of composition is disputed by scholars, is another work in which the courteous, brave, and lovable Gawain plays a major role. As is usual in a narrative of superhuman adventures, the battles are described in accurate if bloody detail:

& nequedant Eliezers se fiert en la presse ou Messire Gauuain estoit enclos et fiert si durement a ij poinz le premier qui il ataint son uenir. qui il lesceruele sel porte a la terre mort estendu & puis un autre & puis le tierz & puis le quart & Messires Gauuain se recombat de l'autre par molt durement & fiert si surement roi Sorionde parmi le hiaume en esclisant que il li colpe une des guerres de son hiaume et l'espee descent sor larcon de la sele deuant si la colpe tout autre. . . .⁸

The indiscriminate killing and the number of dead bodies filling up the pages are not related to any code of ethics or to any human standards of morality. Unlike the exchanges in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the series of battles here, many of them unrelated to one another, are simply used to build up the image of a successful knight of fiction.

Gawain's love affairs are treated with a certain amount of prudence but never with sophistication. Not one of the women portrayed is the equal of Gawain, and he goes from one to the other as he goes from one battle to another. Floree, the daughter

of King Alain, may be cited as a typical example. Her gratitude for what Gawain has done for her is boundless:

. . .ge men uois a mon lit & mi coucherai & uous i uendroiz si(1) uos plaist & nos esbatrons assez ensemble & fererons les huis sor nos de toutes parz & ilec si porrons mielz dire ce que nos uoldrons li uns a lautre & esteigniez ces cierges quant uos uendroiz.⁹

A few lines later, it is learned that Floree gave Gawain a son. What becomes of the son of Floree after that is not known. How Gawain reacts to the matter or how much importance he gives it are questions that remain unanswered. There seems to be no more consistent motivation for his love affairs in this romance than for his numerous battles. The motivation is external and imposed; it does not arise from the hero's character.

Gawain's subsequent liaison with the sister of his worst enemy (Guinganbresil)¹⁰ has even less to recommend it, for there is no real motive, not even the understandable one of gratitude. There is none of the sophisticated dialogue that would have given literary merit of some kind to what remains a meaningless interlude. No critical irony is applied by the author to this type of situation which posits a complex human relationship. The relationships are blended, without too much ado, into a series of battles and other adventures without revealing the stuff of which the hero is made.

It would seem that the author simply accepts the conventions of romance without ever questioning them. Like many others before him, he allows the mask of knighthood to hide the human reactions

of his hero. Therefore, Le Livre d'Artus presents nothing new in its characterization of the chivalric superman, while the possibility of Gawain's personifying a moral attribute is entirely out of the question.

On the whole, the English romancers hold Gawain in higher esteem than do the French. Gawain falls in French estimation with the rise of courtly love, according to the rules of which Lancelot's singleminded devotion to Guinevere seems more admirable than Gawain's playboy tendencies. Gawain's literary reputation also falls when he joins Perceval, Galahad and Bohort in the search for the Holy Grail. Due to a certain English antipathy to courtly love and also to a relatively late introduction of the Grail quest as a theme, Gawain as a hero preserves his more admirable qualities in the English tradition.¹¹ In fact, most English romances go to the other extreme of setting him up as a model of some virtue.

Golagros and Gawane is written with the evident purpose of using Gawain as a model of courtesy: "Gawane, the gay gratus and gude".¹² At the command of Arthur, he fights the knight Golagros, wins handily, but refuses to take the vanquished knight's life:

Rice and raik to our roy Richest of rent
Thou salbe newit at neid with nobillay eneuch
And dukit in our duchery all the duelling
Than war I woundir vnwis
To purchase proffit for pris, All my leuing
Quhare schame ay euer lyis.¹³

Once again, there is a great deal of space devoted to the bloody battle and the physical power of the hero:

Be that schir Wawane the wy likit the wer
The ble of his bright weid was bullerand
in blude.¹⁴

What Gawain thinks and feels or what inspires his consummate graciousness does not seem to matter. Apparently, there is no interior conflict. After all, he is the renowned Gawain, which alone seems to explain his action. Who will question the man whose very name is synonymous with "courtesy"?

Worthy schir Gawane went on his way
Sobirly the souerane salust has he.¹⁵

For this author, Gawain's character is so well known as to be self-explanatory. Consequently, he makes no attempt to introduce the man or his personal feelings. Again, there is no hint of any criticism or of any irony that would place Gawain in a human perspective. In this romance, he is treated on one level, a completely serious one, as an idol who must be revered.

The middle English alliterative romance The Anturs of Arthur, written before the end of the thirteenth century, makes a more explicit use of the flower of chivalry as a living example of virtue. While Arthur and Gaynore (Guinevere) are accused by the ghostly spirit of Gaynore's mother of covetousness and pride, Gawain is presented as a generous, humble, and above all, most courteous knight. In the second half of the poem, Gawain demonstrates his virtue of courtesy when he fights a battle with the knight Golrun of Galway. In spite of the fact that Gawain wins

the battle, he spares Golrun's life and Gawain cedes to Golrun without payment, some of his own lands.

With all the adulation that is given to Gawain in the poem, he is never treated as a thinking human being. The work, which like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, belongs to the period of the alliterative revival accepts the conventions of romance when dealing with the characterization of the hero. The author does not seem to feel the need of developing Gawain any more fully than as a symbol of perfect knighthood who will be a foil for the proud queen and covetous king. There is no irony, and no hint in the story of Gawain's human struggle to obtain the perfection of character which he enjoys.

It is evident, therefore, from this sampling of romance where Gawain is the hero, that the conventions of romance, whether they deal with the moral or physical type of chivalric superman, are not adapted to portray the interior workings of the man. The fact that the interior man is ignored seems to be due more to a complete acceptance of the convention of the knight than to anything else. In most cases, what Gawain does is not questioned simply because he is Gawain.

This brief discussion of the romance hero is set up to make way for a consideration of the possibility that the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight works with his own conception of what the romance hero could be. In order to test this theory, that he makes a radical new use of the existing conventions, it

will be necessary to analyze as completely as possible the person of the hero who appears in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

CHAPTER II

GAWAIN AND HIS QUEST

At the end of the preceding chapter, it was suggested that a new romance hero is created within the romance tradition by the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Exactly how the author makes use of his conventions remains to be seen. While it is unusual to find a hero like the Sir Gawain of this poem in the fiction of the Middle Ages, the author's approach to him is by no means a modern one. It cannot be said, for instance, that there is a complete illusion of psychological reality where Gawain is concerned. It will be seen subsequently that the author's use of symbolism is equally as strong as any attempt to give a completely realistic portrait of his hero. Then too, the author's overwhelming interest in chivalric perfection points beyond reasonable doubt to a medieval attitude concerning the purpose of fiction and the function of the hero.

In his recent appraisal of Gawain studies dealing with the problems which still face scholars¹, Morton Bloomfield demands to what extent ironies are possible in such a work.² He then defines Sir Gawain as : "an aristocratic romance reflecting a many-faceted solidity which is both comic and serious".³ Although he does raise the problem of irony, Bloomfield does not come to any conclusions based on concrete textual analysis. The present

investigation will attempt to make such an analysis with the task which the author gives to the hero. Within the conventions of Arthurian romance, it is accepted that the hero must have a quest. And for the Gawain poet, the conventional chivalric quest becomes a very unusual chivalric test. Although the quest is not equated with testing in all Arthurian romance, it is used in specific instances such as the testing of the Grail heroes⁴. The author leaves no doubt that the quest proposed in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight will be used to test the hero.

In the first Fitte, the author presents a test to the court of Arthur in the person of the Green Knight. When no one rises to answer him, the Green Knight questions their right to their great chivalric reputations:

'What, is þis Arþures hous,' quop þe habel
þenne,
'tat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so
mony?
Where is now your sourquydrye & your conquestes,
Your gryndel-layk & your greme & your grete
wordes?
(309-312)

After realizing that no one will answer him, the Green Knight asks them why they refuse to try the test he proposes. Where is their renowned pride, their fierceness, and their anger? In a sense, the Green Knight is questioning their fitness to be knights. When Gawain finally comes forward to accept the match with the Green Knight on Arthur's behalf (340-360), he not only commits himself to take part in the beheading game, but his conduct must answer as well the insults of the Green Knight.

Because of the nature of the Green Knight's remarks, which strike directly at the valor and courage of Arthur's men as knights, Gawain's quest is also a test which examines his right to the great reputation he enjoys. He has accepted the challenge to defend their reputation as knights and The Round Table will be disgraced if he fails.

The author's choice of the beheading game reinforces this interpretation. It is part of the ancient beheading game in stories from which the episode in Sir Gawain is supposedly drawn⁵ that a specific warrior is singled out purposefully by a mysterious stranger for just such a test. In ancient stories like the Fled Bricrend of the Irish Cuchulinn Saga, the beheading game tests the men of a great court so that its bravest hero may be honored.⁶ Although most of the gruesome details of the older versions are not found in Sir Gawain, the use of the challenge in itself indicates from the beginning that a hero will be tested. The lack of blood indicates, furthermore, that more than his reputation in battle is at stake. Once more, however, the author leaves no doubt of his intentions in the matter. At the end of the poem, he closes the frame by referring to Morgan le Fay whose envoy Bertilak is revealed to be (2445-48). At this time, Bertilak reveals that Morgan devises the beheading game for the purpose of testing the knights of Camelot:

Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wyne halle,
For (to assay) þe surquidre, 3if it soth were,
Tat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde
Table.

Ho wayned me in þis wonder, your wytte
to reue.

(2456-59) [italics mine]

In fact, Bertilak says that Morgan is anxious to know if all she has heard about the reputation of the Round Table can really be true. Therefore, she sets out, in so far as she is able through Bertilak, to present a test which the knights of Arthur will not be able to meet.

Whatever Morgan's motives may be and whatever the exact relationship of this woman to Bertilak (the author does not make these things quite clear), it is only essential to recognize the fact that a knight is not being revered or idolized or set up as a model of perfection in this romance, but rather that he is being examined in his capacity to be a knight.

It is important to note as well that the typical complete triumph of the romance knight is sacrificed in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in favor of a more ambiguous ending. Heinrich Zimmer sees in Gawain, after he has accepted the green girdle, a slightly tarnished chivalric ideal:

The young knight was going to ride more confidently on his quest the next morning, a little less frank and bright, less conscious of his valor, less forthright than he would have been had he not withheld one little thing from the host at the ceremonial of their daily exchange, but nevertheless an extraordinarily heroic horseman.⁷

Zimmer quite correctly puts the emphasis on the interior aspects of Gawain's knighthood. From the fact that Gawain will not be entirely successful in meeting this test, and will be taught a difficult lesson, it can be said, in somewhat oversimplified

terms, that the Green Knight working for Morgan le Fay, creates a kind of school for heroes, a school in which Gawain pursues a very complex subject.

Then too, the idea that the questing knight is being tested is reinforced when Bertilak and Gawain exchange their winnings at the castle. Bertilak makes an explicit reference to testing: "For I haf fraysted þe twys & faythful I funde þe/ Now þrid tyme, þrowe best, þenk on þe morne" (1679-80). Of course, it is at precisely this point that Gawain undergoes a test he cannot meet and passes the chastened way known to few heroes of romance. Charles Moorman defines Gawain's quest this way:

. . . the journey of Gawain amounts, in mythical terms, to a rite de passage by which Gawain is initiated into a full understanding, both of himself and of the values by which he lives and by way of that knowledge to an understanding of the true nature of the chivalry of Arthur's court.⁸

This expression of the purpose of the quest is a good one; for the Green Knight tests all of Gawain's personal and chivalric qualities as a representative of the Round Table. What is more interesting, however, and what has never been thoroughly discussed is how that test was conducted. For this purpose, the person of the hero as well as the symbols with which the author surrounds him will be discussed in order to see how the author combines serious and ironic elements in the poem.

The Test

In the first place, the poem's opening lines place Gawain's test in a context with the deeds of some of world's greatest heroes and at the same time, with the deeds of one of the world's greatest traitors. The poem opens with a reference to Aeneas and his followers, the survivors of the siege of Troy. The mention of Aeneas immediately brings to mind the epic of Virgil, while Brutus is more specifically associated with centuries of respected, English warrior-kings. Although it can be argued that this particular reference is extremely conventional in medieval English literature, the author's use of the convention here goes far beyond decorative purposes. If the frame of reference for Gawain's mission is that of the world's greatest epic heroes, their greatness will be used to emphasize the importance of the quest he will undertake himself. It would seem that by placing Gawain in this tradition the author considers him as great a hero as these men. Understandably enough, the poet leaves no doubt of his intentions in this respect, for he closes the frame with a parallel use of epic reference at the end of the poem (2523-27).

In these same opening lines, however, reference is made to the Trojan traitor Antenor: "Te tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wro3t/ Wat3 tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe" (3-4), and a second context, an unflattering one, is given to the hero's test. Even heroes have been known to fail. Predictably enough, it is in loyalty that Gawain will fail when he decides to

betray his host's trust. For this breach of faith, he will be physically wounded. Because of what Gawain considers to be his "trecherye & vn-trawpe" (2383), he will keep the green girdle as a souvenir of weakness. From the very beginning, therefore, Gawain's test is presented by the author as a serious one with quiet overtones of dramatic irony which will permit him later to examine and criticize his hero. The opening lines, then, serve as guideposts on the road to a correct interpretation of the quest before the mystery is completely unravelled. They should serve as a strong reminder to anyone tempted to misinterpret them that a hero's conduct will be tested, and that the axe contest will have more serious overtones than the predictable bloodbaths of ordinary romance. At the same time, the mention of Antenor's very human failing rescues the poem from the snares of magic or the idea that the incredible events which happen are beyond the power of the hero to control.

Another guidepost, indicating that human conduct will be tested is set up early in the poem when the Green Knight tells Arthur that he has come because of the court's great reputation:

Bot for þe los of þe, lede, is lyft vp so hyȝe,
 & þy burȝ & þe burnes best ar holden,
 Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
 þe syȝtest & þe worpyest of þe worldes kynde,
 Preue for to play wyth in oper pure laykeȝ,
 & here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp,
 & þat hatȝ wayned me hider, i-wyis at þis tyme.
 (258-64)

The Green Knight's series of superlatives is quite revealing: he expects the strongest, and noblest, the most valiant, in sport and the most courteous, of all men. It is interesting to note as well his subtle challenge. He does not say that he believes Arthur's knights have all these virtues but simply that he has heard all these things about the reputation of the Round Table. Surely, the Green Knight's remarks involve the subtlest kind of ironic aspersion--a challenge. In very simple terms, it seems as though the Green Knight wants Arthur and his knights to live up to their reputation for greatness. His challenge indicates that he is not convinced himself of their perfection. Now Arthur has been described by the poet as a redblooded, fighting man (87-89), so it is difficult to believe that remarks of this nature would not have a grave importance in Arthur's eyes. From the beginning of the action itself, the test of Gawain, ^{who} represents the court of Arthur, is presented in a serious light with overtones of irony which are used to question and cast doubts upon the reputed perfections of the hero. In the same breath with which he insists upon the great reputation of the Round Table, the author raises subtle doubts as to its actual perfections.

For example, when the Green Knight demands a gift at Camelot, he offered a battle by Arthur without hesitation. The reaction of the Green Knight to the offer of a battle is that of a wise man laughing at a hotblooded boy looking for a fight. This man does not want to fight with children: "Nay, frayst I no fy3t,

in fayth I þe telle/ Hit arn aboute on þis bench bot berdle³ chylde" (279-280). He then asks for a hero who will play his far more complex "crystemas gomen" (283-289). It is unfortunate that the knights of Arthur refuse to recognize any serious contest beyond visible physical ones. In his encounter with the Green Knight, Gawain will learn to accept the existence of mental and moral testing. In fact, it is the dichotomy between what Gawain expects and what he finds that creates the basic irony of the poem.

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the notion of testing is central to any interpretation of Gawain's quest and consequently to the interpretation of the hero himself. Gawain's right to his great reputation as a knight, questioned by the Green Knight, will be tested in all its aspects. From the very beginning of the poem the author raises doubts about the final outcome of Gawain's quest with references to Troy and Antenor and by means of the ironic aspersions with which the Green Knight challenges the knights of the Round Table. There are many other symbols which the author uses to reinforce the idea of testing.

Of the symbols which the author uses to reinforce the concept of the test, one of the most essential is the pentangle. The author, of his own design,⁹ places the pentangle on Gawain's shield to represent the man and the quest he undertakes. The device of the pentangle itself, although it comes from antiquity,

is very rare in the Middle Ages and is not associated with Gawain who is usually identified with a golden eagle, lion or gryphon¹⁰. Tolkien and Gordon insist that this author's use of the pentangle for Gawain is unique in any treatment of that hero¹¹. The fact that the author departs from a long established tradition in this instance should be considered carefully. In the first place, the author feels the pentangle is important enough to take precedence over marvels and adventures usually associated with the knightly hero: "So mony meruayl bi mount þe mon fynde3/ Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole" (718-19). While he considers that marvels will become tedious even if only a tenth of them are recounted, he is willing to spend fifty lines (616-65) explaining the intricate symbolism of the pentangle in its relation to Gawain: "& quy þe pentangel apende3 to þat prynce noble/ I am in-tent yow to telle, þof tary hyt me schulde" (623-24). Because the author takes infinite pains to identify Gawain with the pentangle, it is reasonable to discuss the use of the device in the Middle Ages.

Richard Hamilton Grene speaks of two traditions which surround the pentangle, one found in Bede's Glossa Ordinaria and the other associated with magic in a better known popular tradition condemned by the Church.¹² In the first instance, Bede explains in his comment on the doors to the Holy of Holies (III Kings 6: 31-32) that:

. . . the pentagonal posts signify the body with its five senses which is destined to be admitted to heaven, and the five cubits signify that this destiny can be achieved only by those who serve God with the five senses of the body and the five senses of the heart.¹³

In the second tradition, the pentangle is associated with a superstitious power over evil spirits and with the Old Testament figure of Solomon,¹⁴ who designed the pentangle to represent truth.

Although Solomon is renowned for his wisdom and kingship, his weakness for women costs him his throne and perhaps his soul: In the Middle Ages, theologians debated whether he was saved."¹⁵

In one sense, therefore, Gawain has a very ambiguous patron. And it is interesting to note the author's specific introduction of Solomon at the end of the poem (2417) in association with Gawain's failure to resist completely the wiles of a woman. It is very possible that the author, aware of popular superstition, makes ironic use of it for one thread in his narrative, one which illuminates the human side of Gawain. The device of the pentangle is ideally suited to represent the hero whose test will have ironic overtones.

In his own poetic analysis, at the beginning of the poem, although he specifically mentions Solomon as the designer (625), the author stays much closer to the less well known ideas of St. Bede than to the popular tradition. Taken as a whole, the passage ascribes a Christian perfection to Gawain's character based on five sets of five Christian virtues. Furthermore, the pentangle is called by its English name: "& Englych hit callen/ Ouer-al as

In light of the explicit and emphasized nature of the context which is given to the pentangle of Gawain, it is reasonable to assume the perfection in question is that of the knight as a soldier of Christ. Grene, enumerating the goals of Christian chivalry, suggests that such a scheme would be very much in keeping with the rest of the poem.¹⁶ Grene gives the evidence for his argument from the poem itself.

Almost every commentator on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight remarks that the poem follows one complete liturgical year, whose beginning is marked by the Church with Christmas and New Year celebrations. No one except Grene has so far examined the fact that the author also takes the trouble to place the leave-taking of Gawain from Arthur's court on two important feasts at the end of the liturgical year, the feast of All Saints: "3et quyl al-hal day with Arþer he lenges" (536), and the following day's Feast of All Souls: "He dowelle3 þer al þat day, and dresse3 on þe morn" (565).

It is not wise to ignore such precision. For All Saints' Day, very much like some modern national holidays, celebrates the victory of successful men. If nations choose to honor patriots, the Church sets up for emulation the faithful followers of Christ. Then too, it emphasizes the victory which awaits the faithful members of the Church militant, those who still fight the world's battles. Therefore, All Saints' Day is a feast of optimism, coming almost at the end of the Church year just before the

warnings to all men to prepare for the coming of Christ at the Last Judgement. But All Souls Day dampens this optimism with remembrance of those who still wait for the complete victory. It is a feast of humility. The perfection, then, which is celebrated on All Saints' Day, the perfection to which each Christian warrior must aspire, is followed by the warning on All Souls Day that man by himself is by no means perfect.

The poem itself follows somewhat the same pattern of the aspiration to perfection followed by the realization of human failings that is contained in the liturgy of the feasts of All Saints' Day and of All Souls Day. In the same way, Gawain's noble aspirations, as they are painted on the shield of a Christian knight will be joined by Gawain's self appointed emblem of humility, the green girdle. The ideal of pentangular perfection, which is set up early in the poem, must be tested in its application to Gawain. The knight must demonstrate that he is worthy of the emblem he chooses. Therefore, the pentangle becomes a basis of judgement, a standard by which Gawain's deeds can be measured. He will be disappointed in his test by tactics for which he is unprepared and by a certain overconfidence in his own ability. The author uses the dichotomy between what Gawain expects to do and what he achieves on his quest as a basis for the ironic application of the second tradition surrounding the pentangle (2417). By the end of the poem, Gawain is much closer to Solomon, who was also deceived by a beautiful woman, than he is to the ideal of perfection presented by St. Bede.

So far, the pentangle has been treated as a static form, or, to use the correct medieval term, an emblem. As the emblem of Gawain's quest for perfection, it allows the author to symbolize Gawain's aspirations and duties as a knight. In another sense, however, the emblem is not static, for it serves as the pictorial image of the conflict with which the author is primarily concerned in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The type of perfection to which Gawain aspires as a Christian knight is a perfection of motivation, as has already been seen. More specifically, it is an attempt to attain perfect faithfulness and generosity with no overtone of self-interest. The difficulty of perfecting any virtue, of course, lies in ruling out self-interest. At the point of Gawain's self-interest, the author will be able to inject the irony which illuminates the man who is the knight. And it is the symbol of the pentangle, representing the aspirations of the knight, which enables the author to measure Gawain the hero without losing his narrative in dogma and theology.

How then, does the author make the pentangle come to life. How does he use the symbol to represent the conflicts with which the poem is concerned? In his narrative, the author treats the virtues of the pentangle as polar opposites, so that a great hero who is seemingly doing battle with his opponent the Green Knight is actually in conflict with himself. We must remember that the author is working within a romance tradition that, so far, has never dealt with the interior world of man to this extent;

to his work. It is certainly not courtesy which Gawain accuses himself as lacking at the Green Chapel. He is quite explicit in bemoaning his lapse from faithfulness. It seems, then, that the virtue of faithfulness or fidelity will be in conflict with Gawain's renowned quality of courtesy.

Now the poem can be analyzed to see how the author manages to put the hero into the compromising situation cited above, in which his courtesy conflicts with his faithfulness. If it is scrutinized closely, it will be seen that the trap set for Gawain by his charming hostess and affable host is one that pits the sociable Gawain against the devoted work-a-day knight. Self confident that no woman has power over him, and relying on his highly developed social agility, he exposes himself to situations which put him in the position of possibly betraying his host, when those situations are plainly avoidable. Why does he do it if not for the sake of being sociable and courteous? How else does he find himself in the position where to refuse a gift from the lady would mean that he would have to exercise a certain degree of barbaric decisiveness, if not from his refusal to speak one unkind word to her? After he surmounts the hurdle and courteously refuses her love and her gifts, he is not in a very good position to withstand her more serious temptation that he break faith with his host. The subsequent offer is too much for him simply because it means saving his own life. At the crucial moment, self-interest enters his considerations, and Gawain becomes the serious-ironic

hero obliged to confess his lack of faithfulness to the Green Knight.

It is in the face of the unexpected that Gawain falls. The strength of his own desires to please and to live are unknown to him until he faces the wiles of the lady. To borrow the style of Bunyan, Courage and Faithfulness, placed in jeopardy by Courtesy, place only second best. Then too, what Gawain means by courtesy and what the lady means by courtesy are two very different things. As the lady states in her second interview with Gawain:

& of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng
a-losed
Is þe lel. layk. of luf, þe lettrure of armes;
(F)or to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe
kn3te3,
Hit is þe tytelet token & tyxt of her werkke3,
How l(edes) for her lele luf hor lyue3 han
auntered.
(1512-16)

The full import of these words will be discussed in a later chapter. It is enough to say now that the emphasis on devotion to a human lady is assigned an importance by Bercilak's wife that puts it out of proportion to the other virtues in the pentangle. Not only that, but it changes the motivation of courtesy. Christian perfection is no longer at the base of courtesy when it is used to seek the favors of a lady and nothing more. In the debates with the lady, the author strains Gawain's own concept of courtesy to the utmost. After Gawain surmounts that problem with a certain enjoyment, an even more strenuous demand is made on his faithfulness, a demand which he is unable to meet.

The poet is no stern moralist, who finds the company of women immoral or distasteful. Otherwise he could never have portrayed with so much good grace the elegant and merry life of the courts of Bertilak and Arthur. Yet, he does insist on balance. The idea that the type of courtesy extolled by the lady should be the chief goal of the knight, as it was in a great deal of contemporary romance, appears to him foolhardy as well as amusing. Therefore, the pentangle looms as an emblem of balance as well as of isolated specific virtues: "Now all þese fyue syþe3 forsoþe, were fetled on þis kny3t,/ & vchone halched in oþer, þat non ende hade" (656-57). If the hero had listened to Bertilak's wife, the equality and proportions of the symbol, which the author insists represents the most perfect knight in the world, would have been altered beyond recognition. The temporary strain which the author places on those proportions throws Gawain into some mildly ludicrous if interesting situations and into an ironic, compromised position due to his lack of balance.

The value of the emblem, then, to represent perfectly the hero and the action of the poem, has never really been considered as it might have been. The author's ability to put an interior conflict into a dramatic as well as an emblematic form certainly points to a work of art of the highest order. The creation of a serious-ironic hero is reinforced by the action and the symbolism of the poem's structure.

At this point, it is necessary to insist that the poet, even though he wishes to teach Gawain an important lesson, never seems to say that perfection is laughable, hypocritical or impossible, but that the achievement of perfection simply requires intellectual foresight as well as the best of intentions. For the author's audience, the attainment of perfection is always possible but incomplete without its final goal in the imitation of the perfection of Christ. Any departure from the attempt at perfection, therefore, can never be a cause for rejoicing at man's common bond of frailty. Any ironic treatment of Gawain, however well done and sympathetic it may be, has as its first purpose the demonstration of Gawain's reaction in a crisis where he makes the wrong choice. At the same time however, the author is aware that human failings, documented as precisely as he documents them, are more or less serious when seen through different perspectives of time. For that reason, after Gawain recognizes what he has done, the author makes ironic use of the second tradition surrounding the pentangle, one perhaps so well known that he does not feel called upon to explain it in the poem. Slyly enough, he has his hero place himself in a long line of brave men, including Solomon, Samson, and David, who can vanquish any enemy as long as she is not a beautiful woman (2416-2428). First among them is Solomon who designed the pentangle to represent truth. Gawain now belongs as much to that tradition as he does to the list of Britain's great warriors.

In a dramatic context, the shield has the double function of protecting Gawain's physical and moral life. The author's treatment of the pentangle is ironic in the sense that he uses it to measure the very human failings of the man. After all, Gawain fights the major portion of his battle in bed without even thinking about putting on his shield for protection. Disarmed and disoriented, he exchanges his faith in all that the pentangle symbolizes in order to gain the protection of the green girdle, a second symbol which, ironically enough, he knots around his waist: "þenn dressed he his drurye double him aboute" (2033). As Gawain learns quickly enough, he makes a very bad bargain, for the green girdle is no more than a token of broken faith.

The change of symbols is very much like the changing of clothes in Chaucer's Clerk's Tale. If Griselda changes her rags for riches, then for rags and finally, for riches at last, each instance represents an increase of loyalty to Walter. In Gawain's case, it represents a fall from fidelity to himself and to his chivalric code, but the technique of giving the symbol dramatic reality is very much the same in both tales. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it is significant that the second time Gawain is armed, before his meeting at the Green chapel, the green girdle has a prominent place while no mention of the pentangle is made at all. The irony has been prepared long beforehand, so that ominous portents of this change can be sensed by the reader even before the Green Knight reveals his identity.

Very often, the author steps in to remind his audience that Gawain's battle with himself, presented in all its elegant detail, can have its ironic side. When Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle, he is a man convinced that he might lose his life at the Green Chapel within a few days. Distressed though the poet insists he is, and as prayerful as Gawain in fact is throughout his cold voyage, he is more affected on his first night at the Christmas vigil with the beauty of Bercilak's young wife than with his own fate-filled meditations:

Ho wat3 þe fayrest in felle, of flesche &
of lyre
& of compas & colour & costes of alle oper,
& wener þen Wenore, as þe wy3e þo3t.
He ches þur3 þe chaunsel, to cheryche þat hende
(943-46)

This rhapsody can hardly be described as a religious litany. In fact, Gawain is not above a lengthy meditation which compares the lady, not too charitably, to her less appealing companion:

For if þe 3onge wat3 þep, 3oþe wat3 þat oper;
Riche red on þat on rayled ay-quere,
Rugh ronkled cheke3 þat oper on rolled;
Kerhofes of þat on wyth mony cler perle3,
Hir brest & hir bry3t prote bare displayed,
Schon schyrer þen snawe þat schede(3) on
 hille3;
þat oper wyth a gorger wat3 gered ouer be
 swyre,
Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalk-kyte
 vayles,
Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ay-quere,
Toret & treleted with tryfle3 aboute,
þat no3t wat3 bare of þat burde bot þe blake
 bro3es,
þe tweyne y3en & þe nase, þe naked lyppe3,
& þose were soure to se & sellyly blered;
A mensk lady on molde mon may hir calle,
 for Gode;

Hir body wat3 schort & pik,
 Hir-buttoke3 bay & brode;
 More lykker-wys on to lyk
 Wat3 þat scho hade on lode.
 (951-969)

It is Gawain's first small but significant distraction on the road to his disastrous compromise.

The author's criticism of the knight, springing from the concept of pentangular perfection, reveals the full range of Gawain's character and also adds tension because it shows him vulnerable from within on a very dangerous level. The device of the pentangle also shows that the author is interested not so much in the fault of Gawain but in following Gawain's progress toward that mishap.

The pentangle contains the essential conflict of the poem, the battle of the faithful knight with the sociable and self-interested sides of his human nature. By applying pressure to one of the knight's virtues, the author prepares the way for consideration of a knight on a serious quest for perfection while preserving the possibility of dealing as well with those factors in his character which may lead him into compromising situations. At no time does the author add anything new to Gawain's character. Even the sociable side of him that sometimes merits ironic treatment can be seen in the analysis of him represented by the pentangle.

The Ironic Qualities of the Quest

An investigation of ^{the} irony of the quest should give at least an approximate idea of what kind of irony it is, and what is its function. Because the irony never becomes cynical or caustic, it never tears down or destroys the character of the hero or the nature of his quest. It does operate in a far more constructive way to illuminate and emphasize the human qualities of the hero undertaking the quest.

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the successful use of irony which highlights the human aspects of the knight depends to a great extent on sophisticated wordplay. For example, the Green Knight's use of the word "gomen" (283) is ironic and carries overtones which Gawain and the other knights do not even suspect. From the strange behavior of the Green Knight, the reader picks up the hint of something a little more complicated. What other "games" would interest a man like the Green Knight if axe-duelling holds such a great appeal? In one sense, Arthur's court is closed to much of reality, for it fails to recognize a conflict that is not a physical contest. It is around the reality that cannot be encountered with physical force that the Green Knight will fashion his games.

As his quest progresses, Gawain plays a second game with his host at the castle: "'Now Gawain,' quoth þe god-mon, 'þis gomen is your awen,' (1635). This second game, unlike the first one, does not inspire terror and dread. In fact, it requires no

more of Gawain than a hunting pact with his host. Bertilak will hunt in the woods while Gawain hunts in the castle, and they will exchange their winnings. For the second time, Gawain does not question the implications of the bargain he makes; nor does he comprehend its complexities. Far more awaits him than he even begins to suspect. For the reader, however, many similarities between the game which the Green Knight wants to play with Gawain and the game which Bertilak wants to play with Gawain are apparent.¹⁷

As the story moves along, and we realize that Gawain will play a third game, a love game, in bed against an adversary who cannot be turned back with sword or shield and against whom armor plate is worse than useless, a third ironic if delightful dimension is given to the idea of games. So far the term includes the beheading challenge, the hunting pact and the duel of wits between Gawain and the lady. It will be seen later how these three pacts were shown subtly by the author to be of one piece. All three games work ironically to corrode the hitherto impenetrable mask of the knight and to reveal the man who wears the armor.

The Green Knight's mention of tests has already been cited as an example of the seriousness of the quest. Bertilak, however interested he is in the testing of Gawain, is not above using words with a double meaning, which if properly understood, would tip his hand to Gawain. After they exchange their winnings on the third evening, and Gawain, like Judas, kisses his host, the

Green Knight contents himself with the wry, parting remark: "Al þat euer I yow hy3t, halde schal I rede" (1970). On the surface, Bertilak seems to be referring to his earlier promise of giving Gawain a guide to the Green Chapel. The remark is similar, however, to the one which the Green Knight had given to Gawain at the court of Arthur almost a year earlier:

That þou schal seche me þi-self, where-so
 þou hopes
 I may be funde vpon folde, & foch þe such wages
 As þou deles me to-day bifore þis douþe ryche.
 (395-97)

When Bertilak, disguised once more as the axe-toting "Half etayn in erde" (140), greets Gawain at the Green Chapel, he calls out in much the same vein:

'Abyde', quop on on þe bonke ouer his hede,
'& þou schal half al in hast þat I þe hy3t
ones.'
(2217-18)

The effect of the promise given three times, at the court of Arthur, at the court of Bertilak, and finally at the Green Chapel, has the same cumulative effect as do the three games. The irony grows out of itself because each time the Green Knight makes the promise, he owes Gawain just a little bit more than he did the time before. It works in the same way that the games become increasingly more difficult and reveal more of the hero. Therefore, without ever diminishing the seriousness of Gawain's quest, the author, using restrained but nonetheless effective ironic insight, is able to reveal the momentary, temporary downfall of a somewhat uncomplicated and unquestioning young man who is very

sure of himself. When Gawain realizes at last what is happening, he will be surprised by his lack of self-knowledge and his insufficient appraisal of his own conflicting tendencies.

Gawain discovers at the Green Chapel that his worst enemy has been his own desire to live:

For care of þy knokke cowardyse me ta3t
To a-corde me with couetyse, my kynde to
forsake,
þat is larges & lewte þat longe3 to kny3te3.
(2379-81)

He reacts in humiliated anger, but the Green Knight simply "leude & luflyly sade" that Gawain was forgiven (2389). Because it is not a fatal error which the author is attempting to portray, he never allows his narrative to reach too tragic a level. In fact, the author is not so much interested in the fault as he is in documenting the series of actions which lead to it and which follow it. Gawain is not long at a loss for explanations. Very soon, he is ready to blame one adversary for what happened to him:

Bot hit is no ferly þa3 a fole madde
& þur3 wiles of wymmen be wonen to sor3e

• • • • •

ba3 I be now bigyled,
Me pink me burde be excused.
(2414-28)

Gawain's two explanations for his actions, one as defensive and self-justifying as the other was contrite and repentant, illustrate perfectly the balance of serious and ironic tones. The author does not present any unresolved paradox that does not already exist

in human nature; his portrayal is an accurate estimate of the contradictions present in human nature. While Gawain learns a great deal at Bertilak's school, as symbolized by the green girdle he wears, he does not learn everything, by any means. If it is every man's quest to recognize his own unresolved conflicts, it is the policy of the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight to permit a certain restrained, ironic appreciation of the difficulties involved.

It has been seen to a limited extent, how the narrative contains, and is inextricably intertwined with, the serious and ironic elements which all meet in the person of the hero Sir Gawain. He is himself a fabulous character in the fiction of the Middle Ages, renowned for his virtue (in some instances, his lack of it) as well as for his courage. In this very unusual and for the romance genre, atypical story, the superhuman characteristics of the knight, corroded by the forces of intellectual conflict, moral combat, and the author's amiable irony, fall away to reveal the human qualities of the man who is also a great hero.

CHAPTER III

THE HOST AND HOSTESS

In order to understand the Sir Gawain of this poem, it is absolutely necessary to know as much as possible about his adversary, whose actions occupy half the central action and who is allowed to find fault with the supposedly invincible hero, Sir Gawain. The Host has already been discussed as the teacher of the hero. In the literary criticism of the poem he is more often treated as a personification of some moral force greater than the one prevailing at the court of Arthur¹ or as a literary representative of ancient vegetation myths.² However, he is rarely discussed for what he very plainly is, a character in a romance.

The Villain

It would seem that the Green Knight's role in the poem is conceived by the author as that of a deliberately ambiguous figure who can alternately inspire terror, laughter, or holy fear of wrongdoing. It is equally possible that the myriad-minded author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight intends that the Green Knight should represent a vigorous moral code. It is possible and even probable that he is partially drawn from ancient myths of the dying and reviving god. More important is the fact that these components are merely qualities of a total creation, and that all

function in the poem as part of the Green Knight's complex poetic personality.

It is important to insist that from the moment the Green Knight enters the poem in the first Fitte, the author takes immense pains to create the illusion that he will be the villain of the piece. After all, it is what the audience expects, a clear-cut, black and white battle between a good man and a bad one. He enters the poem with a whoop, gate-crashing Arthur's Christmas party and riding his horse around the dining hall. This rudeness, which is in direct contrast to the expected behavior of a knight, is only surpassed by his obnoxious language.

Unable to see Arthur, who is not in his place, he asks for "þe gouernour of þis gyng" (225); and, as Marie Boroff points out³, gyng is a word with both respectable and less flattering meanings. It can indicate a simple gathering as well as a crew or a rabble. Only the voice intonation would separate the two connotations. This wild green man is not one who would immediately draw sympathy from the author's sophisticated audience. For very definite reasons of his own, the author goes to great lengths to create a bully.

First of all, the Green Knight sets out to intimidate his Christmas hosts by suggesting the game of the exchange of blows. When that succeeds, he takes the opportunity to insult and taunt the members of the Round Table. The Green Knight's appraisal of the men of Camelot is a masterpiece of compliment

and insult, a linguistic tour de force done in slow motion with no detail omitted:

What, is þis Arpures hous, quop þe hapel þenne,
 Þat all þe rous rennes of þur3 ryalmes so mony?
 Where is now your sourquydrye & your conquestes,
 Your gry(n)del-layk & your greme & your grete
 wordes?

Now is þe reuel & þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
 Ouer-walt wyth a worde of on wy3es speche.
 (310-15)

His language is rendered doubly insinuating because all the while he insults them, he continued to address them in terms of the highest respect and remind them of their shining reputation.

Just before this speech of the Green Knight, the narrator quietly mentions the indisputable fact of the Round Table's "swoghe-sylence":

Per-fore to answere wat3 ar3e mony apel freke
 & al stouned at his steuen & stonstil seten
 In a swoghe-sylence þur3 þe sale riche.
 (241-243)

All of this is not only an ironic thrust at the magnitude of their courage when they are faced with the unknown, but is also a tribute to the terrifying effectiveness of the adversary who lights on their doorstep. None of the entire Round Table calls his bluff; no one strikes a single blow.

Gawain's entry into the poem at the last possible moment is a far cry from the Green Knight's overpowering entrance. And his excuse, based on a courtesy that is mildly ludicrous and inappropriate in a situation where the honor and reputation of the court are at stake, can only be called lame, to say the best for it:

'Wolde 3e, worpilych lorde,' quop (W)awan
to be king,
Bid me bo3e fro þis benche & stonde by
you pere
Pat I wyth-oute vylanye my3t voyde þis
table,
& pat my legge lady lyyked not ille.
(343-46)

After all, why should the Queen stop a knight from carrying out his very obvious duty? And if, as it is hoped, Guenevere is not in charge of the Round Table, no woman, especially one of Guenevere's reputed pride, enjoys seeing her husband and friends insulted by an overbearing stranger.

If Gawain had only said the same words a little earlier, before the Green Knight had called the knights of Arthur cowards, it would have been appropriate. At that time, he could have exposed the Green Knight's rudeness and preserved the reputation of Camelot. As it is, he just manages to accept the challenge. After the Round Table has been humiliated, Gawain faces a battle on psychological as well as physical grounds. It is going too far to say that Gawain's remark is a foolish attempt to vindicate completely all of the other knights, for it is a simple expedient, hampered by bad timing, which allows him to combat the Green Knight. However, it is interesting that he places such an enormous emphasis on courteous behavior, thinking that it will sound perfectly reasonable. Later on, he will make similar judgements with disastrous results.

The author introduces Gawain after the Green Knight is firmly established, after he has humiliated the entire court,

and after Arthur accepts the challenge himself. It would almost seem that the author is depicting the Green Knight more kindly than Gawain himself. In a typical romance, Gawain, not the Green Knight would have been presented in this flattering light. Why does the author reverse the traditional pattern in this case?

The answer to this question can perhaps be given by a dramatist turned novelist of the eighteenth century. In his preface to Joseph Andrews, Henry Fielding writes that anything that is not all it seems to be, or any liberty taken with the normal scheme of things, will shock and delight the reader of books:

. . .our delight, if we examine it, arises from the surprising absurdity, as in appropriating the manners of the highest to the lowest, or e converso.⁴

Although there is no question of social class, somewhat the same thing is going on in the first Fitte of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The Green Knight's uncanny appearance and strange but eminently successful tactics produce delight as well as shock, if only for the novelty of the literary experience. At last, someone creates for the hero an adversary who has equal ability as well as right on his side. Rude or not, his challenge merits an answer and the Knights of Arthur know it only too well.

The author is obviously not afraid to let his hero take the mildly ludicrous position of the underdog at the beginning of his narrative, even though such a thing is just not done in

the accepted romance tradition. Gawain's struggle to be worthy of greatness is revealed as a struggle with which it is possible to sympathize, and which demands more complex reactions than simple admiration. As generations of readers testify, the delight and shock of which Fielding speaks are instantly produced.

The author's creation of an adversary who is half giant, half human and of wild green appearance, a man who is almost more than a match for the hero, reverses the traditional black and white pattern of bad man against good, which had prevailed for centuries in romance lore. The Green Knight is ambiguous and terrifying but he is never accused of doing evil himself. In the first Fitte, it is the Green Knight who usurps the privileged position of invulnerability from the hero Sir Gawain. It would be difficult to upstage a character like the Green Knight at any time. In his first appearance, no one, not even the hero knows exactly how to cope with him. He seems to embody all the terror and mystery with which man is confronted by the existence of the unknown. He represents a new taste, an adversary who gains the sympathy of both author and spectator, a new kind of opponent to face a new kind of hero.

The Hunter

What else is there to know about the adversary or so-called villain? In the first place, Bertilak is a hunter. In the form of the terrifying Green Knight, he dresses as one as well. He has no armor plate or shield:

Wheper had he no helme ne hawp(e)ergh nauber,
 Ne no pysan, ne no plate þat pented to armes,
 Ne no schafte, ne no schelde, to schwue ne
 to smyte.
 (203-05)

On the contrary, he wears a simple jacket and mantle:

And al graped in grene þis gome & his wedes,
 A strayt cote ful stre3t, þat stek on his
 sides,
 A mere mantile abof, mensked with-inne
 With pelure pured apert, þe þane ful clene.
 (151-54)

It is the sort of clothing that is perfect for a hunt but which would never do for a battle with men dressed in armor. All this must be apparent to the men of the Round Table who offer him battle; yet, they persist in mistaking his intentions. What then, does a hunter symbolize for the Middle Ages?

First and foremost, the hunter is associated in a popular tradition with the chief hunter who is the devil! Dale Randall studies the Green Knight's specific fiendish qualities in a recent article which points out that green is the color of the devil, the dead, and the fairies. At the same time, he demonstrates that the Green Knight's ability to assume different forms is an inherent quality of devils.⁵ For A. H. Krappe, the Green Knight represents death itself, and the Green Knight is the lord of Hades.⁶ Furthermore, Gawain himself believes it is a devil who should inhabit the Green Chapel: "Here my3t aboute myd-ny3t/ þe dele his matynnes telle" (2187-88). Gawain also makes the wry observation that it is fitting for his adversary to be a green man since he must be a fiend:

Wel biseme3 þe wy3e wruxled in grene
 Dele here his deuocioun on þe duele3 wyse;
 Now I fele hit is þe fende, in my fyue wytte3,
 þat hat3 stoken me þis steuen, to strye me here.
 (2191-94)

On the other hand, hunting is a noble sport which makes demands on a man's courage and endurance and which is reserved almost exclusively for the aristocracy.⁷ For Hans Schnyder, the hunter suggests Christ and his preachers in pursuit of the human soul.⁸ Then too, green is the accepted Christian symbol of hope. In the liturgy of the Church year, green is used after Christmas and Easter, the two great periods of rejoicing in the promise of the Christian life. For the Christian, green also means being alive in the good works of faith, hope, and charity.⁹

It would seem that the author uses two conflicting traditions when he creates the Green Knight, just as he does with the lore surrounding the pentangle. It would seem, too, that he aims for the creation of purposeful ambiguity with which to endow the Green Knight. What could possibly be more at odds than the devil, the enemy of hope and the personification of hope itself? This paradox operates in much the same way as the Green Knight's monstrous green axe, which promises death and destruction, as opposed to his holly branch (206-07), which is a Christmas symbol of peace.

The initial impact of the figure of the Green Knight is therefore one of confusion. Is he all good or all bad, or is he perhaps a little bit of both? The author's reasons for

introducing this character are not revealed until much later in the poem. At the time when the readers of the poem begin to suspect that the Green Knight is one and the same person as the hunter-host Bertilak, the mystery begins to unfold.

The Perfect Host

The purpose of the ambiguity surrounding the Green Knight is evidently one calculated to produce terror, but is also a very effective method of disguise. Although the narrator scatters broad hints by means of wordplay through passages where Bertilak appears,¹⁰ it is very improbable that Gawain could have recognized the imperious Green Knight in the affable Bertilak. This is just the suspense which the author wishes to create. Even when the audience begins to suspect a double meaning in Bertilak's words, Gawain will remain unconscious of any hidden purpose. The example of the Christmas gomen and references to testing have already been cited. During the scenes in Bertilak's hall, the author goes to similar lengths to present the perfect host and gentleman as he does earlier to give the illusion of a rude inter-loper. For this reason, it is very interesting to trace the clues which the author leaves for his audience to link the imposing Green Knight of the first Fitte with the gracious Bertilak. These clues lend to the poem as a whole the suspense and irony which give the necessary preparation for understanding the significance of the hunting scenes.

First of all, Bertilak is a hunting man, associated with the forest as was the Green Knight. In itself, this would not be enough evidence, for hunting was the favored sport of most noblemen. Even Bertilak's extraordinary abilities in this line are not enough to arouse suspicion of his real identity. Added to and accumulated with other small details of the same nature, however, it will become important and very revealing.

For example, another characteristic of the Green Knight is his boisterous love of bargaining. In this instance, it is easy to see the similarity of conception with which he invents two games, each of which presents danger to him. In the first, he risks his own neck. In the second, he risks the honor of his wife. Closely associated with his courting of danger is his double-edged mirth. The Green Knight is capable of joking about the axe duel and passing it off as sport (285). In the same vein, Bertilak laughs when he learns who Gawain is: "When þe lorde hade lerned þat he þe leude hade,/ Loude laȝed he þerat, so lef hit hym þoȝt" (908-09). The author insists as well on the mirth which prevails every night in the hall of Bertilak. Friendly bets would not be out of place in such an atmosphere: "Swete, swap, we so--sware with trawþe" (1108). Thus the exchange of blows is neatly paralleled by the exchange of gifts. It is very well done, too well, in fact, to be an accident. At the hall of Arthur, the Green Knight calls his axe a gift: "I schal gif hym of my gyft pys giserne ryche" (288), which he will give to the man who dares to cut off his head.

There is not enough evidence to identify Bertilak beyond doubt with the Green Knight. This is saved for the climax at the Green Chapel. Suspicions and inferences, however, can easily be drawn from the incidents cited above. It is only the author's intention to caution the spectators that Bertilak is more than he seems to be.

Then too, it is strange that Bertilak is familiar with the location of the Green Chapel, which is only two miles away (1078), when no one else for miles around has ever even heard about it. When Gawain demands information from his host, he is answered with a laugh that baffles any number of interpretations: "Penne la3ande quop þe lorde, 'now leng þe/ For I schal teche yow to þa(t) terme bi þe tyme3 ende'" (1068-69). Following this exchange, Bertilak proposes that Gawain make merry at the castle while he still has time for merrymaking, with the result that Gawain feels he has already kept the bargain on which his quest is founded: "now acheued is my chaunce, I schal at your wylle/ Dowelle" (1081-82).

There is one final hint, buried in a mass of description which, if it had been noticed by the hero, would have changed the course of his quest. That detail, however, included to add to the irony of the poem, is placed there for the benefit of the readers, not for the hero. At this point, it is important to insist on the importance of the narrator, whose observations have no connection with the thoughts of the hero. What the

The Lady

What should be Gawain's moment of triumph in any other story, where he would be rewarded for his courage in returning to keep the bargain,¹¹ is usurped by his host, the courteous man who tempts him to folly and wins. He does not do it alone. Two enemies are pitted against Gawain when he only expects one. These enemies, wise enough not to confront him directly, turn him against himself. That is, they place him in a situation where two of his virtues will be in conflict, and where one virtue will have to take precedence over the other for him to escape the trap set for him. For this reason, his enemy is in part a shadow which he cannot identify because it is the state of his own soul in which one virtue battles another for supremacy. A set of values and value judgements are in question. Gawain's clever if worthy adversaries do not hesitate to probe this vulnerable point.

It is significant that the lady enters the poem in her own right with as bold and rude a gesture as Bertilak's romp at Arthur's party. Like her husband, she uses the tactics of surprise and a double-edged tongue. After all, as hostess, she has no right to go to Gawain while he is still asleep or to waken him. Neither are her opening statements the epitome of graciousness. She tells her visitor that he is her prisoner and offers him her love, for which he does not ask: "3e are wilcum to my cors/ Yowre awen won to wale" (1237-38). Very much in the manner of her husband who had embarrassed Arthur, she deliberately puts Gawain

in a difficult situation. For the second time, Gawain does not seem to feel that this rudeness in a dangerous situation relieves him of the necessity to observe the niceties of courtly behavior. Although he has the right to be angry, he never once steps out of his role as the perfect house guest. At the same time, he allows Bertilak's wife to woo him at will as a woman worthy of respect, when by his own standards of courtesy, she proves she does not deserve it. The role adopted by the lady and the one which Gawain, pushing the virtue of courtesy to its outer limits and perhaps beyond, allows her to play is the innocent one of a hostess all concerned for the welfare of her guest.

Like her husband, the lady mingles flattery with stinging criticism. In their second interview, her praise of Gawain is comprehensive: "Pat so 3ong & so 3epe as 3e at þis tyme/ So cortayse, so kny3tly, as 3e ar knowen oute" (1510-11). She then proceeds to a calculated denunciation of Gawain's chivalry because he does not live up to her conception of the courtly code or his own reputation which she equates with his famous courtesy of a knight who brings bliss to the bower: "Why, ar 3e lewed, þat alle þe los welde3/ Oþer elles 3e demen me to dille your dalyaunce to herken" (1528-29). Like her hunting husband, she is after big game, and does not hesitate to use all the weapons in her arsenal. Gawain is nicely trapped in a conflict between his reputation for courtesy which he does not want to lose, and the danger to his bargain with his host which the lady represents.

The hostess, who really does not want to be caught any more than Gawain wants to catch her, lets him think he wins a great victory over himself. Actually, she is not ready to permit the interviews to end in any other way. After he refuses her gift of love and feels confident he has won his battle with himself while preserving his reputation for courtesy, she offers him the second temptation represented by the green girdle and achieves the results she is seeking from the beginning of the interviews. After all, this is the only kind of betrayal, which as Bertilak's wife, she can permit.¹² Everything she does up to the point of offering him the girdle is a subterfuge to disguise her real intentions and a means of letting him think he is the winner in their contest.

The author gives Gawain two enemies when he only expects one. His reasons for doing so are as obvious as they are diverse. The man who appears to be his ally in a friendly game and the lady who seemingly cares only to protect his life are adversaries of the highest order. Gawain's enemy is in part a shadow which he cannot identify because it is the warring state of his own soul in which one virtue battles another for supremacy. At this point Gawain is not aware of any enemies about him, though he has three: the knight, the dame, and himself. The author makes the odds against Gawain almost but not quite insurmountable. By giving the hero complex adversaries such as Bertilak and the lady, the author is able to explore the basic irony on which the poem

is founded, the dichotomy between what Gawain expects to meet and what he actually does encounter on his strange quest to seek the Green Knight.

CHAPTER IV

TESTING THE PENTANGLE

The so called "temptation scenes" of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight have been much discussed. Although it can be effectively argued that it is no longer profitable to turn over such a well trampled literary field, the mystery behind the continuing debate remains unsolved. Interpretations which relate the action exclusively to moral allegory and a lesson on chastity¹ do not explain the attractiveness of these scenes. At the other critical extreme, explanations which insist solely on their elegant sophistication² fail to take into account the very real seriousness of what the author intends to portray. Temptation scenes in earlier romances like Ider and Le Chevalier a l'Epee, for example, do not intrigue and baffle us nearly so much or sustain our interest.

Part of the difficulty in dealing with the scenes in Sir Gawain lies in the fact that so many themes are compressed so quickly into so little space--barely 356 lines are devoted to the interviews between the lady and Gawain, while the hunts only comprise 276 lines. Instead of attempting to impose a ready-made solution on this intricate literary construct, it seems better to proceed with as much balance as possible toward an understanding of the major components. For present needs, they can be labeled

simply as the cross-purposes of the dialogue between Gawain and the lady, the multiple symbolism of the hunts, and the importance of the various changes of pace used by the poet in alternating between the hunts and the castle scenes.

Talk and Double Talk

Words, sophisticated words with multiple meanings, levels, and tones, spell the difference between the love scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and those of earlier or contemporary romances.³ Before the appearance of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, there were two prevailing attitudes in literature toward the relationship between men and women. The fabliau-like tendencies seen in Le Chevalier a l'Epee have already been discussed in detail.⁴ Co-existing in literature at the same period are the tragic love stories like Erec and Enide in which men and women sacrifice themselves completely for one another. The completely serious love story contributes a great deal to the romance, however, in that it places a new importance on dialogue and accurate portrayal of interior feelings. With the rise of courtly love in France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the relationship between men and women takes on a new importance in fiction. A consequent need arises to develop conventions and dialogue which will effectively express the complex feelings of the men and women portrayed in these situations. In his article "On Courtly Love and Courtliness", Father Denomy deals with the

troubadour poetry from which the romancers borrow a great many of their terms.⁵ At the same time, he is careful to define the difference between the language of the troubadours and of the romance writers:

The troubadours were concerned primarily with moral worth and moral perfection; their stress and accent is on the ethical aspect of behavior. There is nothing of le salut, le baiser, le congé, l'accueil, with the niceties of social intercourse, nothing of the politesse recherchée of the chivalric ideal. The difference is, perhaps, one of genesis. It may perhaps be phrased thus: cortezia is an ideal and a virtue of the courtly love; courtoisie is the virtue and the ideal of the chevalier.⁶

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, coming as it does at the end of the romance tradition in fourteenth century England, makes full use of the advances in technique worked out by the authors who treat seriously the relationship between men and women. The author of this poem creates a new art out of the technique of effective dialogue. At the same time, he does not sacrifice the action of earlier romances, for he keeps the hunt with its pounding rhythm always present in the background. What the author does with the dialogue can be summed up for purposes of discussion quite simply. He creates two sets of speeches which do not answer one another. A modern example is found in the politician who refuses to give a direct answer to the question asked of him; instead, he reinterprets the question to his own liking, actually answering another question on a closely related topic.

(1239-40), Gawain replies that she seems to have strange ideas about him: "In god fayth,' quop Gawayn, 'gayn hit me þynkke3,/ Þa3 I be not now he þat 3e of speken" (1241-42). Wishing to set the matter right, he insists that it is he, in terms of what he considers his "hendelayk", who should be her servant:

Bi God, I were glad, & yow god þo3t
 At Sa3e oþer seruyce þat I sette my3t
 To þe plesaunce of your prys.
 (1245-47)

In this instance, Gawain puts her words into a context she never intends him to use. The lady's weapon, therefore, is one of eloquence. Just as Gawain had been forced earlier to use an axe to duel with the Green Knight, he is forced to use words in his duel with the lady. In their first encounter, they continue to speak at cross-purposes, using the word seruyce on which Gawain bases his defense. The lady gives it the connotation of service in the art of love. In answer to Gawain's request that he wishes to perform some other service for her, she insists that there is only one which will please her, the one for which she has already asked: "Þe prys & þe prowes þat plese3 a1 oþer,/ If I hit lakked oþer set at ly3t, hit were littel daynte" (1249-50).

At the end of their first interview, Gawain pleads once more that he is the servant of the lady: "& soberly your seruant my souerayn I holde yow" (1278). This time, however, he puts it into a precise Christian context: "& yowre kny3t I be-com, & Kryst yow for-3elde" (1279). His position is unequivocally that of a Christian knight devoted to a service that is not motivated

by any human lady. The interesting closing remark, 'may Christ reward you',³ could mean many things. It may mean that he can only offer her limited service even though she is his "souerayn"; or it may mean that only Christ himself, in contrast to a human knight, is capable of rewarding her as she deserves. In other words, it may be an attempt to show her the limitations of his service, just as it may be a compliment to her worthiness. At any rate, Gawain once more puts her remarks into a context which she never intends him to use and deftly sidesteps fulfilling her request for service in the art of love.

For purposes of her own, the lady places herself in the position of the man who wants to win a lady's love.⁹ In terms of the courtesy of courtly love for which she speaks,¹⁰ the lady is committing outrageous treason. If she really upholds the courtly ethic, she belongs on a pedestal, not at the foot of the man who should be pursuing her. The lady places herself in the ridiculous position of running in the wrong direction, after the knight instead of away from him. This strange turn of events is not lost upon any audience. As a result of her attitude, Gawain is placed in an awkward position as well. He carries out a hasty if orderly retreat before her at the same moment the author says his host is in pursuit of a noble foe. Then too, the fact that Gawain carries out this love debate in bed gives his real wit comic overtones of brinkmanship. There is nothing, of course, for which Gawain can be criticized, except perhaps for allowing

the situation to exist at all. And it is at just this point of self-interest, because Gawain evidently enjoys the company of the lady, that the poet injects his amiably ironic insight. The situation itself, not Gawain, is presented as mildly ridiculous. For this reason, one sympathizes with Gawain's desire to please a beautiful woman, while enjoying the revelation of his human character. At the same time, the seriousness of the debate is never lost.

In their second interview, the meaning of the word chivalry itself is debated. From what the lady says, it is obvious she considers Gawain a great knight only because of a certain reputation, one which she has either heard or invented, that places Gawain first in "the true sport of love":

That so 3ong & so 3epe as 3e at þis tyme,
 So cortayse, so kny3tly, as 3e ar knowen oute,
 & of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng a-losed
 Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes;
 For to telle of þis teuelyng of þi trwe kn3te3,
 Hit is þe tytelet token & tyxt of her werkke3.
 (1510-15)

The word lettrure or doctrine is very revealing, for the lady sets up a kind of chivalric theology in which she equates the highest goal of the man who bears arms with the lel layk of luf or true sport of love. For her, chivalry is not a serious vocation leading to perfection but a sport, game, or contest in which two lovers are the players. The teuelyng or struggle of which she subsequently speaks, carries out her theory that the most important battles of the true knight are his love battles. Gollancz indicates

that when the poet refers to tytelet token, he intends specifically to recall the typical headings found in the typical chivalric romance in which the main theme is that of the knight in love. An indication of this sort goes a long way to suggest that the author is indulging in a lighthearted parody of the older literary conventions.

In this interview, Gawain's replies give the impression once more that he avoids giving the lady a direct answer to her queries. At no time does he answer directly her argument that the love of which she speaks is the true base of chivalry. Gawain does not cross her will, but continues to offer her his own concept of service (1544-48), which is to serve her as a Christian knight. Once again, the author's amiably ironic insight, which emphasizes Gawain's difficulties in extricating himself from this mildly ludicrous situation of being pursued by a woman, works to reveal the man and his struggle with perfection. When the lady insists (1490) that a Christian Knight is always quick to claim a kiss, Gawain has scruples about asking for one, but coy as a maid, he is at the same time perfectly willing to let her kiss him: "I am at your comaundement, to kysse quen yow lyke3/ 3e may loch quen yow lyst, & leue quen yow þynkke3" (1501-02). Surely, this reversal of the traditional role of men and women is meant to be seen as a clever parody of the courtly convention. This will be seen more clearly in the third interview.

On the third day, the lady continues her luf-la3yng with the interesting assumption that it is wrong--"blame 3e disserue" (1779)--for Gawain not to love her:

3if 3e luf not þat lyf þat 3e lye nexte
Bifore alle þe wy3e3 in þe worlde wounded
in hert,
Bot if 3e haf a lemman, a leuer, þat yow
lyke3 better.
(1780-82)

After her assiduous wooing, the lady will excuse Gawain from the service of her love if he will only say that he already has a lover or someone he "lyke3 better"! At first glance, this apparent altruism seems more than a little bit absurd. The lady's statement, however, contains the essence of the doctrine of courtly love. In the dialogue of Andreas Capellanus between a man of the higher nobility and a woman of the middle class, the woman refuses to tell her wooer if she loves or intends to love anyone else.¹² It is with a proposal similar to the one of Bertilak's wife that the nobleman feels he can prove to the reluctant woman that she must love him:

Now I shall prove to you that you cannot properly deprive me of your love. Love is either a good thing or a bad thing. It is not safe to say that it is a bad thing, because all men are clearly agreed and the rule of Love shows us that neither woman nor man in this world can be considered happy or well-bred nor can he do anything good unless love inspires him. Wherefore you must needs conclude that loving is a good thing and a desirable one. Therefore, if a person of either sex desires to be considered good or praiseworthy, in the world, he or she is bound to love.¹³

Interestingly enough, the lover of Andreas' dialogue posits love as a necessity anterior to happiness and all efficacious action. And by love, he means the courtly code of love whose rules,

including the one that marriage is no barrier to love, are also included in the text of Andreas.¹⁴

For the lady, no one can accomplish good if he does not serve the God of Love. Therefore, she is ready to accept Gawain's refusal to love her if it springs from devotion to someone else. Her attitude makes sense only in the courtly scheme of things. Her argument, a difficult one to combat, is saved for her last interview with Gawain. The hero, still preoccupied with preserving his reputation for courtesy does not want to fail in courtliness: "He cared for his cortayse, lest crapayn he were" (1773).¹⁵ Realizing, however, that he has no more subtle answers for her arguments, Gawain chooses to answer the lady directly for the first time:

Pe kny3t sayde, 'by Sayn Jon,'
 & smeþely con he smyle,
 'In fayth I welde ri3t non,
 Ne non wil welde þe quile.'
 (1788-91)

In giving this answer, of course, Gawain rejects the foundation of the courtly ethic that love of a woman is a necessary prerequisite to noble action.

In rejecting the lady's proposals, therefore, Gawain refuses to accept the tenets of a code which would destroy his own concept of perfection, symbolized by the pentangle. The motivating force in the courtly ethic is a self-seeking devotion which works to gain the favors of a human being, while the motivation of the chivalric ethic is the selfless quest to imitate the

charity of Christ.¹⁶ What is going on in the interviews is very serious indeed. It is here that the aspirations of Gawain, as they are symbolized in the pentangle, are tested in order to see how much those concepts really mean to him. Those who dismiss the scenes as elegant badinage and nothing more have missed the whole point of the complex wordplay between Gawain and the lady. It is much more complex, too, than a simple lesson in chastity; for in this case, it is necessary to identify the nature of the attack which is being made on Gawain's chastity. It is evident that the attack represented by the lady strikes not only at Gawain's physical purity but at the creed by which he lives as well.

The Hunter and the Hunted

Complex as the temptation scenes are in themselves, the author is not content with them alone. In fact, he insists on creating a pictorial image of what is happening to the hero, which in itself is just as complex as the interviews between Gawain and the lady. For this purpose, he makes Bertilak and Gawain allies in a hunting game so that their actions each day will be reciprocally united; what one wins, he will give to the other. There is really no doubt that the hunts and the scenes in the castle are directly related to one another; there is only the problem of deciding exactly how they are related and what the implications of this union contributes to the author's conception of his hero.

We have seen how the strain which the lady places on Gawain's virtue of courtliness causes him to tire, and to neglect the protection of his virtue of faithfulness. In that sense, therefore, Gawain is not only doing verbal battle with the lady, he ends by fighting an interior battle with himself in which his interest in staying alive conflicts with his faithfulness to the chivalric code. Because he does not recognize either the lady or Bertilak, his supposed hunting partner, as an adversary, Gawain, the supposed hunter, becomes the hunted one without realizing it. Bertilak and the lady hunt for some weakness in him just as surely as Bertilak hunts the deer, boar, and fox in the forest. Bertilak refers explicitly to this testing of Gawain, with implications which Gawain, of course, does not recognize: "For I haf fraysted þe twys & faythful I fynde þe" (1679).

It is not difficult, therefore, to see how H. L. Savage equates the pursuit of Gawain with the chase of the deer, boar, and fox,¹⁷ claiming that Gawain is as noble and prudent as the deer the first day, as tenacious as the boar the second day, and as despicable as the cunning fox on the last day. Although Savage does not mention it, the author's imagery backs up his theory quite nicely. The does, for example, retire prudently to deep valleys and shadowy retreats where it will be difficult for the hunters to find and trap them: "Þe does dryuen with gret dyn to þe depe slade" (1159). The tenacious boar is described with a tough hide and great bristles which turn back the arrows of the hunters:

own pleasures, the boar's thick hide and bristling appearance as symbols of its ungovernable pride, and the cunning of the fox as a symbol of its avaricious and fraudulent nature. For any audience exposed to medieval sermons on the seven deadly sins, these connotations could not possibly have been lost any more than the animal's place in heraldry or the attitude of hunters toward them could have been mistaken. Once more, in the same way that he treats the pentangle and the person of the hunter, the author makes use of more than one tradition surrounding the symbol he chooses.

In answer to any literalists who wish to see only hunts with no deeper signification, it can be argued that in putting the fox last, there is no logical climax, for Bertilak is obviously disappointed that a fox is all he can find to hunt (1944-45). A mere series of hunts would more properly begin with the fox and progress toward the more exciting hunting of the wild boar.²⁰

With the complex signification of the hunts comes the question of the author's attitude toward his hero. Since the author takes the trouble of expressing his opinion of Gawain in such a complex allegory and since the identity of Gawain with the deer and the boar is flattering while the relationship with the fox implies criticism, it is evident that the author is working on two levels with his hero. The identity with the deer and the boar represent a gracious compliment with a slight overtone of irony in the fact that they are pursued animals just as Gawain

is. His subsequent relationship with the fox is more completely ironic. Once more, when Gawain's self-interest appears, the author injects his ironic insight. It is the low point of Gawain in the poem and the only time he is totally unsympathetic. Gawain, however, good he may be, is not perfect and the author wants us to know why. That is why the author lets him bleed, confess, and repent, for he is far more interested in documenting the circumstances with which even a great hero fails to cope than with a tragic fall.

It is also essential to note that the wealth of detail with which the hunts are presented extends as well to the scenes in the castle. How does the author's sense of proportion affect his concept of the hero? The details seem to underline the fact that there are two hunts in progress, not just one. While the author explains in detail how the hunters seek out the deer, he also takes pains to show how the lady approaches her prey on the first day, including her use of hunting terms (1210-11) and "littel dyn at the door" (1183). Gawain's prudent if ludicrously fearful reaction of peeping out of his retreat: "A corner of þe cortyn he ca3t vp a lyttel/ & wate3 warly þider-warde quat hym my3t" (1185-86), immediately puts the hero in a position, which if it is not laughable, is without doubt a strange and inappropriate one for a knight who should have nothing to fear from anyone. It also has the effect of putting the hero, like the deer, on the defensive and in retreat from the beginning of the episode.

Another ironic interjection occurs a few lines later (1202), when Gawain, realizing it is the lady, crosses himself, as the author insists in hope of safe conduct (1203). In this instance, the author's view of the hero is only mildly ironic as he points out Gawain's charming vulnerability.

On the second day, however, the author's irony takes on a new tone. Gawain, far from protesting that he would prefer hunting to remaining in the castle and far from rising earlier to meet the lady away from his room in spite of the temptation he recognizes in her, permits her to find him in bed once more (1469-75). Subsequently, Gawain must allow the lady to kiss him twice out of courtesy (1501-02) (1555-57). It is no accident that the author chooses a hero whose name is synonymous with courtesy. When the lady asks him whose courtesy is renowned (1524-34) to teach her of love (she equates the two terms), he feels called upon naturally enough to defend his reputation. Since she demanded the same service the day before (1226-40) and Gawain can expect that she will make similar proposals on this second day, he has chosen a very dubious method of defending his courteous reputation. His road is certainly a dangerous one. The risks he takes with regard to his own chastity and with regard to the loyalty he owes the host are incredibly greater than any reward he will have in convincing the lady that he is indeed the courteous Gawain of whom she has heard. On this second day, Gawain allows himself to be hunted when it is possible for him to avoid the situation

entirely. Taking into consideration Schnyder's theory that the hunts represent the type of sin to which Gawain is tempted, it can be seen where the author's sympathy lies. If the boar is a dangerous beast who gores the hunters (1460-63), then the temptation is equally serious, and Gawain's initial vulnerability has become something more serious as well, something approaching the nature of a fault for allowing himself to be tempted.

On the third day, the significance of the hunt has a serious and completely critical application to Gawain. The sin to which he is tempted is even more serious than that of the preceding day. Just as no one is so despised as the traitor (3-4), and no animal despised so much as the fox (1944), no sin is more vile than a breach of trust. On this third day, too, Gawain is waiting for the lady in bed once more, even though she has twice tried to tempt him to love her. In this sense, Gawain merits the difficulty he has in overcoming the temptation to love her and in sending her away courteously. While their encounter contains a fascinating debate, Gawain is not blameless on a moral level. At the same time, he puts himself in a defensive position where it is extremely difficult for him to refuse a gift from the lady. This is, of course, preparatory and vital to his acceptance of the green girdle. Under any other combination of circumstances, he would not have been so violently tempted to keep it. Gawain allows the lady to place him in a position where his virtues are in conflict with one another, and as it has been seen, he is

unable to rise above this dilemma. He puts too high a price on courtesy and devaluates recklessly the worth of loyalty.

The Changes of Pace

For purposes of introducing exciting action in what could otherwise have been a long and uninteresting debate between Gawain and the lady, the author keeps the hunts with their pounding rhythms always in the background. For example, the hunts serve as a frame to each interview, preceding and following them without exception. The connections which the author makes between the alternating hunts and interviews also express very neatly his attitude toward his hero. He never fails to underline the fact that the hero of the story is lying in bed while his host is taking part in a man's sport in the woods.

The author's method is a deceptively simple one. He juxtaposes the two situations repeatedly without making any editorial comment whatsoever. On the first day, the author says only that "Þus layke3 þis lorde by lynde-wode3 eue3/ & Gawayn þe god mon in gay bed lyge3" (1178-79), after which he proceeds to recount the interview. The interview is ended in much the same way. Gawain's pleasure with the ladies:

W(at3) neuer freke fayrer fronge
 Bitwene two so dyngne dame,
 Þe alder & þe 3onge,
 Much solace set þay same,
 (1315-18)

is placed next to the description of the host's more masculine occupation: "And ay þe lorde of þe londe is lent on his gamne3/ To hunt in holte3 & heþe at hynde3 barayne" (1319-20). Exactly the same thing happens with the second day's events:

He rechated, & rode þur3 rone3 ful þyk
 Suande þis wylde swyn til þe sunne schafted.
 Þis day wy þis ilk dede þay dryuen on þis wyse,
 Whyle oure luflych lede lys in his bedde,
 Gawayn grayþely at home, in gere3 ful ryche
 of hewe.
 (1466-70)

And the second day's interviews close once more with a similar technique (1560-61). On the third day, there is no change:

& 3e he lad hem bi lag-mon, þe lorde &
 his meynny,
 On þis maner bi be mountes, quyle myd-ouervnder,
 Whyle þe hende kny3t at home holsumly slepe3.
 (1729-31)

We have, therefore, a repeated contrast between the hunting lord and the sleeping Gawain, in which the author's attitude toward his hero is revealed. The repeated juxtaposition of their dissimilar circumstances underlines the fact that it is slightly inappropriate for a strong, healthy, young man to take his ease in bed every morning and permit ladies to amuse him without ever voicing so much as a single protest. It is the situation as much as the character of the knight himself which is the target for the author's well aimed irony. It is not a situation in which a courageous man should wish to be found day after day. As the audience learns what to expect, the juxtaposition of the two men's daily affairs gradually represents wider and wider

differences. At the same time the author speeds up the pace, for the alternating hunts and castle scenes become progressively shorter, giving the impression of a man falling inevitably into catastrophe of which he is totally unaware. The irony is cumulative; that is, it grows out of itself with each ironic view which the author presents of Gawain having a little more emphasis than the last one. The breathless rhythm of the hunt, set up against the lackadaisical one of the castle scenes, is also not without its effect. The author's imagery, structure, and rhythms all work to reinforce his complex concept of the hero Sir Gawain, whose quest for knightly perfection is at the heart of the poem.

CHAPTER V

THE SERIOUS-IRONIC HERO

From what has been said, it is evident that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is neither a tragedy nor a comedy. Quite the contrary, the author works to preserve a delicate balance between the serious and ironic elements of his story on their corresponding levels of symbolism. It is unusual in the fiction of the Middle Ages to find a hero like the Sir Gawain of this poem, but the author's approach to him is by no means a modern one. It cannot be said, for instance, that there is a complete illusion of psychological reality where Gawain is concerned. The author's use of symbolism is at least as apparent as any attempt to give a realistic portrait of the hero. It is the overwhelming interest in chivalric perfection coupled with the pervasive presence of symbolism as it is found in the pentangle, the person of the hunter, and the hunts themselves which point to a medieval attitude toward the purpose of fiction and the function of the hero. Although the hero is developed beyond the traditions of the typical romance, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight remains a part of that tradition.

The figure of the hero, Sir Gawain, demands a complex reaction on the part of the audience. It is possible to admire Gawain's courage and his aspirations while sympathizing at the same time with his lack of prudence as well as his desire to be

all things to all men (and all women). The author takes a point of view of his hero which is medieval and not modern, one which enables him to see that hero both seriously and ironically, because he evaluates his progress in what is perhaps the first major encounter of the hero with the struggle for moral greatness. For this reason, the outcome, although it is a serious one, can be treated more lightly than the last, fatal step of a wiser man. The author chooses to treat Gawain at the beginning of his chivalric career, while there is still time for him to learn and to profit by his mistakes.

Gawain's failures, his hesitation to accept the challenge, his lack of foresight in discerning the dangerous nature of the Host's bargain, and his delight in being with the lady even though he knows she tempts him are all small matters taken separately. Even though not one of his failures is big enough in itself to alter the image of the hero, taken together, they lead Gawain to the point where he accepts the green girdle. These ironic soundings document the progress of the knight who is moving toward a disastrous compromise. At the same time, a picture is given of the man behind the armor of the knight which is not often found in romance fiction.

In his extraordinary use of convention, however, the author is not so much interested in realism as he is in the hero's quest for perfection. For that reason, he does not hesitate to suspend slightly the conventional laws of gravity.

What happens to the Green Knight when he loses his head cannot be termed realistic anymore than Morgan le Fay's powers can be termed realistic. As part of the accepted romance tradition, such things are posited and accepted for the same reason--so that the story can be told. Because of their existence, the author is free to document with infinite detail what really interests him, namely Gawain's sometimes unsteady march toward progress in perfectibility and towards better understanding of himself.

Part of the poet's extraordinary use of convention lies in the fact that, with the exception of Morgan le Fay, who has her standard witch-like propensities, no one is a type character. Gawain's adversaries require the same type of complex reaction as does Gawain himself. Although they are not drawn so fully as Gawain, Bertilak and the lady cannot be classed as stock villains with only bad points. Bertilak has equal ability and more foresight than the hero. For her own part, the lady is neither the beloved idol of courtly love poetry, the weeping woman unloved by the knight of her choice, or the despised female of the fabliau-like romances, but a complex blend of temptress and loyal wife. Sent to try the hero, these characters succeed admirably and not without inspiring a certain admiration for their thoroughness. All the same, they remain the indisputable foes of the hero, who tempt him with all he must conquer in himself. The author, then, gives himself room to develop both the serious and ironic sides

of his hero by creating adversaries who are not what they seem to be and the basic irony of the poem is founded upon the unexpected. When Gawain sets out upon his quest, he expects to do battle with the Green Knight and must learn (2379-86) later that he has done battle with himself. Morton Bloomfield expresses it this way:

Things are not quite what they seem. Gawain, the perfect knight is also a human being, and the Green Knight is really only a mask. His wife only seems to be unfaithful. The old harmless lady is really a witch. The court is silly and benign. Life is a tissue of contradictions, even in its most artistocratic and idealized form.¹

It is the author's interest in Gawain's quest for perfection which leads him to investigate so closely the character of the man who wears the armor of the knight. Gawain is a masterpiece of knightly dignity. He is almost always worthy of the chivalric ideal which the author, in the application of the pentangle to him, insists he represents. At the same time, it is often possible to smile at what is lacking in him, as does the author, because he is young and also because he works to overcome those failings. The author looks behind Gawain's aspirations to perfection for those attitudes in which the man's own interests may still usurp the place of his total dedication to the chivalric code, because at those points perfection cannot yet be achieved. He looks for the unknown factors in Gawain, the unexpected side of the hero surprised to discover the strength of his own desires to please and to live. These things which the hero does not know about himself before he undertakes the quest lead him to make a

disastrous compromise with the chivalric code and serve as targets for the author's sympathetic but uncompromising irony.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I

¹Gilson, "La Mystique de la Grace dans La Queste del Saint Graal", Les Idees et Les Lettres, 1932, 85.

²Kee, Gawain, A Study in Epic Degeneration. For a detailed study of Gawain's development as a hero in the literature of the middle ages, there is no better study than this recent but unpublished doctoral thesis. It is his contention that Gawain's reputation as a great hero is undermined by the advent in romance lore of courtly love and the Grail quest.

³Kittredge, A Study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 89-93.

⁴Two examples of romances in which ladies fall in love with Gawain almost at first sight are Hunbaut, a French poem of the thirteenth century described in E. C. Armstrong's edition of Le Chevalier a l'Epee, 68, and L'Atre Perilleux, also a thirteenth century work, described by Kee, Study in Epic Degeneration, 73.

⁵Kittredge, Study of Sir Gawain, 92.

⁶Le Chevalier a l'Epee, ed. Armstrong, 1012-1015.

⁷Ibid., 1098-1109.

⁸Le Livre d'Artus, ed. Sommer, p. 34, ll. 4-7.

⁹Ibid., p. 109, ll. 48-50.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 115, ll. 34-36.

¹¹For further study of this very interesting idea which can only be treated in passing here, see Kee, Study in Epic Degeneration, 130-136, 222-225.

¹²Golagros and Gawane, ed. Stevenson, 109.

¹³Ibid., 988-993.

¹⁴Ibid., 936-937.

¹⁵Ibid., 125-126.

¹⁶The Anturs of Arthur, ed. Robson, p. 1-26.

CHAPTER II

¹Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal", PMLA, Vol. 76, 7-19.

²Ibid., 11.

³Ibid., 18.

⁴Gilson, "La Mystique de la Grace dans La Queste del Saint Graal", 54-91.

⁵Kittredge, Study of Sir Gawain, 1-106.

⁶Fled Bricrend, ed. Henderson, 117-129. This Irish account of the beheading game contains two versions of the story. In the first, the challenger is a friend of the hero but disguised as a carl in order that he might help the hero Cuchulinn win the champion's portion. Three other warriors are tested by the carl, but all three fail to return for the second blow which will decapitate them. The carl then demands of the reluctant Cuchulinn that he accept the challenge. When Cuchulinn finally does so and returns as well for the second blow, he proves he is no coward. His friend, disguised as the carl, taps Cuchulinn with the blunt end of the ax and reveals himself. Cuchulinn is proclaimed winner of the champion's portion.

⁷Zimmer, The King and the Corpse, 73.

⁸Moorman, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", MS, XVIII, 165.

⁹Editors of the poem agree that the poet follows no known tradition in assigning the pentangle to Gawain. In their notes to line 620, Gollancz, who follows the first editor Madden, as well as Tolkien and Gordon insist on this fact.

¹⁰Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Tolkien and Gordon, 91, note 620.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 91, note 620.

¹²Greene, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection", ELH, 29, 132.

¹³*Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁴Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, 123-124. The magic properties of five derive from Persian religions. The number has great power (magic) over all things: like nine it is incorruptible by virtue of its recurrence in multiplication. It is habitually used in magic in the five pointed star of Solomon because its properties coincide perfectly with attributes of the number five. Like the lover's knot, it is endless and thus corresponds to the 'circular' property of the number.

¹⁵Greene, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection", 130.

¹⁶Greene, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection", 122. "The chivalric ideal, however modified and tarnished by practice and human imperfection, was the imitation of Christ, the effort to realize in the individual and in society the perfection to which human nature aided by grace could aspire. The dominant image which bound the ideals of chivalric and Christian perfection was the Christian knight, champion of the Church militant on earth, committed to the pursuit of personal virtue and the preservation of the divinely sanctioned social order. Add to this the image of life in the world as a passage moralise in which perfection is an ideal to be sought but achieved only in another world beyond challenge and frustration, and we have the moral world of the poem."

¹⁷See Ch. III, 49-52.

CHAPTER III

¹Moorman, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", 158-172.

²Speirs, "Critical Study of Sir Gawain", Scrutiny, 16, 274-300.

³Boroff, A Stylistic and Metrical Study, 225.

⁴Fielding, Joseph Andrews, 20th Century Edition, xvii.

⁵Randall, Dale B. J. "Was the Green Knight a Fiend?", SP, LVII, 1960, 479-91.

⁶Krappe, A. H. "Who Was the Green Knight?", Speculum, XIII, 1938, 206-215.

⁷Savage, The Gawain Poet, 32.

⁸Schnyder, An Essay in Interpretation, 63.

⁹Ibid., 42.

¹⁰See below, 63-67.

¹¹Fled Bricrend, ed. Henderson, 93-129.

¹²In the old French romance Ider, the wife of King Ivenant who successfully tempts visiting knights to love her is rewarded with a kick au ventre in front of the court as well as unkind words and a second kick in private by her angry husband.

CHAPTER IV

¹Schnyder, An Essay in Interpretation, 63-66.

²Halstead, "Artifice in Sir Gawain", A Chaucerian Puzzle and Other Essays, 93-107.

³The sophisticated treatment given to the temptation here is in direct contrast to the lack of refinement and fabliau-like tone of Ider, a thirteenth century French romance.

⁴See Ch. I, 5.

⁵Denomy, "On Courtly Love and Courtliness", Speculum, 28, 44-63.

⁶Ibid., 63.

⁷Kitely, "The De Arte Honeste Amandi of Andreas Capellanus and the Concept of Courtesy in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", Anglia, LXXIX, 7-16.

⁸Ibid., 7.

⁹Ibid., 12. "It is evident that the lady is using courtly love motifs and that the typical courtly love situation is reversed."

Greene, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection", 136. "These scenes are high style parody of a discredited literary convention, in striking contrast to the simplicity and coarseness of the analogous scenes in The Carl of Carlyle."

¹⁰The Art of Courtly Love, trans. Parry, 69. It is interesting to compare the words of one of the many devoted men in the treatise of Andreas where the woman must be sought and won: "Although in the flesh, I rarely come into your presence, in heart and spirit, I never depart from it, for the continual thought which I have of you makes me present with you very often and makes me see constantly with eyes of the heart that treasure about which my attention turns, and it brings me both pains and many solaces. For what a man desires with all his heart, he is always afraid some unfavorable happening will interfere with. How faithful I am to you and with what devotion I am drawn to you no words of mine can tell."

¹¹Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Gollancz, 118, Note 1515.

¹²The Art of Courtly Love, 88. A similar argument is presented in Dialogue 5, 73-83.

¹³Ibid., 88.

¹⁴Ibid., 184-186.

¹⁵Denomy, "On Courtly Love and Courtliness", 46-47.

"In qualifying the love of the troubadours as courtly, the net result was to draw it into the orbit of courtliness, the ideal of the social and moral decorum of the courts of the nobility. . . The consequence has been to confound and to confuse courtly love and courtliness and its attendant virtues with the courtly love poetry embodying courtly love." This is just the mistake which Gawain avoids so tactfully.

¹⁶See Ch. II, Note 16.

¹⁷Savage, The Gawain Poet, 35-38. Savage's basis for this application does not come from within the text so much as it does from medieval treatises on hunting and heraldry.

¹⁸Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Tolkien and Gordon, 110, Note 1719ff. "Alway þei senten of hym for he fleþ by þik spoies also for he stinkeþ euermore."

¹⁹Schnyder, An Essay in Interpretation, 64-65.

²⁰Speirs, "Critical Study of Sir Gawain", Scrutiny, 1950, 290. "The hunts move successfully to the climax, which is symbolic; the boar, we should think, would follow the fox, if the crescendo were literal-dramatic and not, as it is, spiritual-symbolic."

CHAPTER V

¹Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal", 19.

INDEX TO ABBREVIATIONS OF PERIODICALS

AN & Q	American Notes and Queries
ELH	English Literary History
ES	English Studies
JEGP	Journal of English and Germanic Philology
LTLS	London Times Literary Supplement
MLN	Modern Language Notes
MLQ	Modern Language Quarterly
MLR	Modern Language Review
MP	Modern Philology
MS	Medieval Studies
NEOPHIL.	Neophilologus
N&Q	Notes and Queries
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association
RES	Review of English Studies.

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